Final Report: FTS Writing Think Tank Project, Summer 2018

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Executive Summary

Fremo (WAC Director) and Vrooman (Writing Center Director) convened The Writing Think Tank in June of 2018. The Think Tank included Assessment Director Sarah Ruble, new FTS Director Lauren Hecht, and three additional FTS instructors (Kyle Chambers, Hayley Russell, and Margaret Bloch-Qazi). Several Think Tank members also participated in the 2018 FTS Refresher Workshop led by Fremo, providing much-needed context and common vocabulary for the summer's conversation. The group met for three retreats (June 13, July 9, and July 16), and the work continued both virtually and via teleconference. In addition, some members met in pairs to workshop one another's final draft assignments for FTS. Many thanks to outgoing FTS Director Kate Knutson, Ruble, and members of WPAC (2017-18) for their assistance in planning the project. We also thank Mary McHugh and Brenda Kelly for their encouragement and financial support.

Agendas, notes, and other supporting materials for each meeting are available upon request.

Think Tank Goals and Outcomes

The goals for the Think Tank were:

A. Revise SLO #3[1];
B. Determine which goals/tasks are most important for FY writers, with an eye toward the Challenges Curriculum;
C. Create a suite of templates that could be used by FTS instructors to help move us toward a more clear-cut set of goals and practices; do this using *They Say, I Say* as a required course text, and with an eye toward an argumentation focus (and no "research paper");
D. Design an assessment plan for the FTS that includes the Think-Tank members as "experiment groups" and an additional three faculty members as "control."

The Think Tank achieved all four, revising goals as necessary (a slightly different assessment plan, for instance, resulted from our work). This report addresses each of the four goals/outcomes.

Outcomes A-D

A. Revise SLO #3 (re: argumentative writing)
This SLO, as the FTS / WRITI Assessment of 2017-18 suggested, is too complex. The Challenge Curriculum currently envisions *three additional required WRIT courses post-FTS*. FTS need not expect to accomplish so much with writing in the future, and that fact alone helps support a move toward concentrating on a narrower focus for writing instruction in FTS. Finally, we note inconsistency between the FTS program's current official language and that of the WAC program. FTS has adopted a single writing SLO. The Faculty Handbook (yellow pages) language, however, continues to list four SLOs for all WRITI courses, including FTS. In the short term, we recommend removing all references to the

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[1] Original document notes that we are revising SLO#4, but this was in error. We worked on #3.

WRITI SLO#3 to bring our WAC web pages into alignment with the FTS program's web pages. This is a short-term fix while we revise the curriculum and implement new Faculty Book language.

It's more important, philosophically, to develop 1-2 new SLOs for writing in FTS once the WAC program articulates the relationships between FTS and the writing requirement, not to mention majors, the capstone, and general education. We devoted much of our time this summer to this discussion. But without equal attention to oral communication or any indication of what the FTS program desires in that area, it's tough to be very specific. Here is what the Think Tank came up with for circulation to WPAC and FTS Advisory Board this fall:

Option One

- *FTS PROGRAM SLO: Students analyze how purpose, audience, and context affect communication, and practice speaking and writing in ways that demonstrate these rhetorical skills.*
- *FTS Writing SLO: Students write a text for a specific purpose within a specific context that meets the needs of at least one audience.*

Option Two

- *FTS Program SLO: Students will practice reading and writing arguments in order to identify, analyze, and produce an argument's basic elements: claims, support, explanations, and implications.*
- *FTS Writing SLO: Students will write at least one argumentative paper that sustains and supports a thesis in response to an existing scholarly, cultural, or historical conversation.*

As you will see from the discussion on the following page ("...Goals/ Tasks…"), these possible SLOs align with a recommended focus on critical thinking, reading, and argumentation for FTS. They move us away from any focus on "research" or "research paper" outcomes and streamline instruction. They help students see oral and written communication as valuable tools, rooted in thoughtful and ethical exchange, conversation, and interplay.

B. Determine which goals/tasks are most important for FY writers, with an eye toward the Challenges Curriculum;

After reviewing and analyzing the data from three assessments, two direct (2017-18 FTS Writing Assessment project, 2010-11 WRITD Assessment) and one indirect (2018 WRIT Faculty Perceptions Survey), Think Tank members recommend a focus on argument--learning to read, analyze, and construct them-- for future iterations of FTS. Not only do the assessment data point us in this direction, but such a focus can serve as a building block for WRITD courses, which depend upon disciplinary forms of argumentation, *and* for civic participation. Such participation requires us to read critically and evaluate the credibility of other people's arguments, as well as to advocate for our positions ethically. By clarifying a common focus, we might also address the lack of cohesion in the FTS program. FTS sections differ wildly from one another, and assessment data suggest that some classes focus on "finding resources" rather than learning to read, understand, evaluate, and utilize them well. This is a problem discussed by our own Barbara Fister in her article, "Sources of Confusion," which all Think Tankers read this summer.

After much discussion, we agreed with Fister and the assessment data. FTS students can typically generate texts that are rhetorically appropriate stylistically, but such texts don't exhibit a *deeper understanding* of writing as intellectual conversation among those who share knowledge and interests. During the assessment project of 2017-18, we saw that FTS students use source material tangentially at best. Many struggle to produce thesis-driven papers in which an argument is not just stated but sustained and supported throughout an entire piece of writing, a skill vastly important for success in post-FTS WRIT courses. The Think Tank recommends moving toward a pedagogical approach where instructors use shorter, thesis driven argumentative writing assignments, providing students with article-length texts/ essays chosen by the instructors themselves, to study, analyze, and write about. This will help provide greater consistency of assignments and outcomes across sections. (This does NOT preclude using other texts--paintings, films, poems, novels, and so on, to augment that instruction.)

FTS should continue to help students develop rhetorical flexibility using a multi-stage writing process, with plenty of feedback from peers and instructors. But the "writing process" itself should be seen more as the means than the end. In FTS, the writing process is what students use to develop original arguments, which demonstrate their rhetorical awareness. As a result:

We advocate seeing FTS as an introductory course, one that helps students use rhetorical terms/ frameworks as tools for reading and analyzing arguments, and develop their own thesis-driven arguments, which should be rhetorically appropriate. The method for achieving these goals is a process-based approach in which students figure out what "works" for them as they plan, draft, revise, and edit those arguments. We agree with our library staff: the "research paper" and "research process" do NOT belong in FTS but rather should be contextualized within more disciplinary frameworks appropriate post-FTS.

C. <u>Create a suite of templates that could be used by FTS instructors to help move us toward a more clear-cut set of goals and practices; do this using *They Say, I Say* as a required course text, and with an eye toward an argumentation focus (and no "research paper");</u>

The most tangible outcome of our summer project is [The FTS Teaching Commons for Writing](#), a web-based resource for FTS instructors. After spending a full retreat discussing A and B above, all members of the Think Tank created their own writing assignments (formal and informal) for their respective FTS sections. We did so with a "Challenge Theme" framework in mind, ensuring that our "regular" topics could be used, but with more of a problem-solving focus. Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* (3rd. Edition) provided our shared vocabulary for discussing argument. We then named and defined concepts that undergird argumentative structures ("building blocks"), and developed common strategies for teaching those concepts and related skills. As a result, we modeled a way to help instructors teach students to generate thesis-driven arguments by the end of the FTS course. In other words, we used backward design and outcomes-based planning strategies.

[The FTS Teaching Commons for Writing](#) is a collaboratively authored web resource that should help instructors introduce, model, and assess students' work on two key concepts: **understanding rhetorical situation** and **reading and writing arguments**. This resource includes several components: 1. *Assignments*: sample templates and rubrics for thesis-driven argument assignments, easily adaptable for any FTS topic; 2. *Building Blocks*: handouts, exercises, informal assignments, and links to other resources that model ways to teach students about thesis-driven writing; and 3. *Implementations*: actual syllabi

developed by the team of experienced FTS instructors who created the Commons (Think Tank members), all of whom are using and assessing the templates and building blocks this fall. (For more about why this was our focus, see Outcomes A and B above).

Assignments includes four possible argument-based templates: Writing an Editorial, Writing a Position Statement, Writing a Critical Introduction, and Creating a Brochure. Each is accompanied by a set of sample rubrics (ranging from holistic to criterion-based assessment) for each. *Building Blocks* provide five "suites" of materials to help instructors introduce terms and concepts, and sample exercises for guided practice. In addition, each *Building Block* includes linked resources, all vetted by Think Tank members. The *Building Blocks* are: Understanding Rhetorical Situations, Summarizing What We Read, Making Arguments, Supporting Arguments, and Revising for Clarity and Style. Finally, in *Implementations,* we link the assignment templates and building blocks to actual syllabi provided by Think Tank members who are using and assessing the templates this fall. The materials are intended to be revised and by FTS instructors as they create their own unique, individual syllabi and assignments. *Note that we are modeling only ONE Assignment and syllabus implementation at this time:* Margaret Bloch-Qazi's Reproductive Technology themed course ("Writing an Editorial"). We did not want to roll out all materials at once. First, the Think Tank members want to assess and discuss some materials after using them in the fall, 2018 semester. Second, members did not want to overwhelm FTS instructors at the end of the summer, when they had probably already prepared syllabi. We will roll out the full FTS Writing Commons resource in spring of 2019.

D. Design an assessment plan for the FTS that includes the Think-Tank members as "experiment groups" and an additional three faculty members as "control."

Ultimately, the Think Tank members rejected an experiment / control group model. There are just too many variables. First, since we aren't actually all teaching the identical syllabus or course texts, there couldn't really be a true "experiment" group. Second, other FTS instructors aren't being asked to use *They Say, I Say*. Final papers from the Think Tank members' sections can't really tell identify whether the templates or They Say/ I Say directly affect students' work. Apples and oranges. Oreos and bananas. Kool-Aid and Kahlua.

Ultimately, practical questions must drive our assessment: What do we want to know? Why do we need to know it? How can we find this desirable information out most directly and reliably?

These are our pressing questions for assessment this fall:

1. In what ways can these Writing Commons materials help instructs teach argument? Do these actual building blocks seem like the "right ones" for the job? What do instructors think? (*Method required: focus group or post-course survey*)
2. What evidence suggests that students actually learn to produce thesis-driven arguments using these materials? What do their final argumentative papers look like? *(Method required: direct assessment of student work at the end of the course)*
3. How, if at all, do our students find *They Say I Say* beneficial? Does using this book help students develop a shared vocabulary for talking about argument? Do they enjoy *They Say, I Say*? *(Method required: focus group or post-course survey)*

4. Do our instructors find *They Say I Say* beneficial? If so, how? Does it help them develop a shared vocabulary for talking about argument? Do they enjoy *They Say, I Say*? *(Method required: focus group or post-course survey)*

Assessment Plan:

A. DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WORK

- Assess final drafts of argument papers from the six sections of FTS taught by Think Tank members in FA 2018 (Hecht X 2, Ruble X 1, Fremo X 1, Bloch-Qazi X 1). Assess work in JA 2019.
- The six instructors will each use an assignment that stems from one of the Writing Commons templates. This will be the final formal paper of the course.
- Use the same rubric utilized for the 2017-18 FTS WRITI assessment.
- Members of FTS AB and WPAC will be invited to serve as readers and should be compensated for this work (WAC budget, FTS budget, College Assessment budget).
- Fremo and Ruble will analyze data and compare results to the 2017-18 data set. If deemed necessary, readers will re-convene to discuss sample essays from each of the two years' data sets.

B. INDIRECT ASSESSMENT (FACULTY and STUDENTS)

- WPAC and/ or FTS AB members will design a survey for the six faculty members to garner initial impressions of the effectiveness of Writing Commons materials.
- Vrooman will lead discussion during December, 2018 or January, 2019 so that the six instructors can reflect on their experiences. Writing Center tutors may be asked to help facilitate to take notes.
- WPAC and/ or FTS AB members will design a survey for the students in the six sections to garner initial impressions of the effectiveness of Writing Commons materials.
- Writing Center tutors will facilitate student focus groups during December, 2018 or January, 2019, assisted as needed by Sarah Ruble.

D. REPORT/ FEEDBACK LOOP (INSTITUTION) Fremo and Hecht will draft final reports for their respective programs. Sarah Ruble will synthesize reports for the institution, aided by Fremo, Hecht, and Vrooman, addressing the "feedback loop" and making final recommendations for ongoing curricular revision.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done. But we want to emphasize that we enjoyed this work and found it energizing. This process confirmed what many faculty already know: we must have the necessary time, space, and compensation to do the important work of curriculum revision and assessment. It cannot be "tagged on" to an already overworked program director or faculty member. We needed to think creatively, to listen to one another without worrying about territory or budgetary issues. We read new materials, listened to one another's suggestions, and were reminded to appreciate our talented colleagues. This work must be ongoing, it must be compensated, and it must be a part of our "regular" work as faculty--maybe not every summer, and maybe not for every one of us. But surely many of us can benefit from years when we focus on pedagogy and program development as opposed to only our own disciplinary research, as pedagogy and program development are important intellectual work.